



Microfinance Amid Conflict: Taking Stock of Available Literature

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Abbreviations

AMAP	Accelerated Microenterprise Advancement Project
ACLEDA	Association of Cambodian Local Economic Development Agencies
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc.
CGAP	Consultative Group to Assist the Poor
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DFN	Development Finance Network
EPAU	UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit
IDPs	internally displaced persons
ILO	International Labor Organization
K-REP	Microfinance Bank based in Kenya
MBP	Microenterprise Best Practices
MED	Microenterprise Development
MFIs	Microfinance Institutions
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
ROSCAs	Rotating Savings and Credit Associations
SEAD	Small Economic Activities Development
SFCL	Small Farmer Cooperatives Ltd.
Sos FAIM	Action pour le Developpement Luxembourg
UNAIDS	The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WOCCU	World Council of Credit Unions, Inc.

Abstract

The “Microfinance Amid Conflict” research, funded by USAID under AMAP, is one of the nine knowledge generation topics implemented by the Chemonics Consortium. This research intends to produce literature for practical use on why, when and how to respond with various types of microfinance products and services that meet clients’ demand in diverse conflict situations.

As part of the research, we conducted a detailed search in February 2004 of available literature on microfinance in conflict areas. Through web search and personal contacts, we gathered a total of 84 documents produced since 1996 that directly addressed the issues related to mitigating and managing conflicts using microfinance as a tool. Of this, we selected 38 recent key documents that relate to the specific issues we plan to address during the course of the research.

We reviewed the selected documents for existing views on the role of microfinance in conflict areas; conditions for initiating microfinance; microfinance products and services suitable for various conflict settings and special population groups such as returnees, refugees, demobilized soldiers, widows, and youth; institutional types; risk management and coping mechanisms used by clients; and special challenges in operating in conflict areas versus in stable areas.

The stock taking exercise helped to identify areas that have already been examined with clear outcomes, areas that are examined but require further analysis and areas that have yet to be examined. The exercise guided us to target gaps in the available literature for practical use in conflict areas.

In this document, we have very briefly summarized the highlights with a reference document hyperlinked wherever possible to relevant websites so that the information can be more easily accessed in the future. A companion piece to this document discusses the existing gaps that require further examination through this and future research to help successfully operate microfinance in conflict areas.

Keywords: microenterprise, microfinance, conflict, development

Evolution of the Literature

Microfinance in conflict is an emerging field even though it has been practiced since the mid-1970s, primarily funded by donor initiatives. The first formal experiments with microfinance, recorded in Bangladesh, were indeed a response to restore income generating activities after the civil war and floods in 1972.

Several of the earlier attempts, however, have failed due to faulty designs based on ill-conceived assumptions of microfinance designs and implementation in conflict environments. But initiation of microfinance in conflict situations has continued and is now extensively used as a powerful development tool. Nonetheless, challenges and opportunities related to designing and implementing effective microfinance that meets the specific demands of potential clients in conflict-affected areas is less understood.

While less was known a decade ago, we are now endowed with a reasonable body of knowledge that can be used to advance the field. Several country and program specific experiences of microfinance providers in conflict areas are now documented and have been disseminated through internal publications and consultant reports (Pearse and Forster (2002) on Afghanistan (2002); Ruwanpura (2001) and Charitonenko (2001) on Sri Lanka; Das (2003) on Kosovo; Wehnert and Shakya (2003) on Nepal; Concern Worldwide (2002) on Mozambique, Rwanda, Angola and Cambodia; Maier and von Pischke, eds.(2003) on several new and innovative initiatives in the Balkans and Georgia; to mention a few recent ones). Each study by itself is context specific, yielding few generalizations to guide one through a new conflict situation.

The first significant comprehensive research, which rigorously examined several of the country and program specific experiences focused on microfinance in conflict-affected areas, was undertaken by the social finance sector at ILO (Nagarajan, 1997; 1999) and by the Microenterprise Best Practices project funded by USAID (Doyle 1998). These studies cut across several contexts and provided overviews on the microfinance sector and captured important lessons learned on provision of microfinance in conflict areas. They comprehensively document what exists on the ground with some performance details. They primarily focus on microfinance institutions (MFIs) that are supported and run by external agents and address the challenges and opportunities for microfinance institutions in providing financial services. Later, cross-country studies conducted by Wilson (2002), Williams (2002) and Manalo (2003) complimented the existing comprehensive studies by adding newer insights, especially from client perspectives.

In addition, with advanced Internet-based communications facilitated by the Development Finance Network (DFN) and Planet Finance, healthy debates were held among researchers, donors and practitioners furthering active dialogue on these issues.

All of these studies and debates clearly demonstrate that microfinance can be effectively provided in conflict environments. The literature, however, fell short in its direct use to practitioners. The studies were limited in their focus on how supply responses were specifically developed to address demands in specific conflict settings. There was a need for quick and easy tools to guide practitioners in conflict areas. Microenterprise Best Practices, based on case studies, developed several focus notes to describe design features and implementation details, such as security that facilitated microfinance success in post conflict environments (Larson et al., 2002). Training manuals and programs to prepare microfinance providers in conflict areas were developed by ILO/UNHCR (Nagarajan with El-Zoghbi, Larson et al., 2002). Concern Worldwide, funded by DFID, is now developing a toolkit to help design microfinance products that cater to client demand in post-conflict environments (Wilson and Kidney, 2004).

Highlights from the Literature

A decade ago, diverse views existed as to the relevance of microfinance in conflict areas. On one hand, microfinance was viewed as a tool to help war torn societies by creating employment and as a reward for war related sufferings. Furthermore, group based financial intermediation was presumed to help with building forms of social capital such as trust that were destroyed during the war. On the other hand, some considered microfinance in conflict environments incapable of generating wide outreach in a sustainable and efficient manner, because stable environmental conditions for microfinance success are absent.

2.1 Microfinance increasingly used as tool in conflict settings

While controversies still remain, the growing evidence from the field has led to some convergence of views. Examples of some successful microfinance experiments that have achieved considerable outreach and sustainability have convinced many of its use as a promising intervention mechanism in conflict situations to reactivate the damaged economy. The majority of practitioners also agree that microcredit or credit-led microfinance (1) can be initiated with very few environmental requirements, (2) is only one tool amongst others that contribute towards economic development, and (3) can, by itself, neither end conflicts nor can become a primary vehicle for peace building.

2.2 Divergence on how microfinance should be adapted in conflict areas

Several sound microfinance practices can be successfully adapted or modified from normal situations to suit conflict areas. However, divergent views still exist on the need for some deviations from best practices to suit conflict areas, such as differing views on the use of loans and grants during various phases of transition from war to peace; pricing and collateral; and the provision of microfinance services other than credit. The divergence may, however, reflect limited understanding on the use of best practices and on the welfare enhancing/reducing results of such deviations. The deviations and their impacts on the financial sector and the clientele are seldom discussed and documented in the available literature.

2.3 No single appropriate microfinance method for clients in conflict settings

Different designs have been successful: lending methodologies, such as group and individual lending for various types of clientele, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Various institutional models, such as apex institutions, credit unions, microfinance banks and cooperatives have been started in war affected areas. These diverse models extend the frontier of finance from the traditional approach of servicing through non-profit, non-governmental

organizations that are primarily funded by donors and demonstrate that there is no “one size fits all” to microfinance in volatile areas.

Unexpanded Issues

The current literature has facilitated advanced learning in the provision of microfinance in conflict areas. However, issues remain for expanded analysis to clearly understand microfinance amid conflict and to convert them into practical tips.

3.1 Need for strengthened guidance on microfinance in conflict situations and analysis of various conflict environments

Little research has been conducted to date that conceptualizes and characterizes the role of microfinance under various conflict scenarios. This type of analysis can be used to document relevant field evidence. Clear, distinct and widely accepted definitions on terms, such as “conflict situation” and “post-conflict,” are difficult to find and may not be necessary, since conflicts situations frequently overlap and evolve. However, in-depth analysis of the environmental context that identifies and distinguishes between various types of conflict situations according to social, political, religious and economic characteristics is crucial.. By creating and applying an environmental context tool to various situations, emerging lessons may reveal patterns that would greatly improve the current understanding of how to adapt microfinance interventions in conflict-affected environments.

3.2 Unclear links between various types of crises

Lessons from managing and mitigating other systemic risks such as natural disasters, financial crisis and HIV/AIDS are seldom incorporated in designing projects in conflict affected environments. Conflicts are invariably related to the occurrence of other types of systemic risks. Analysis of systems and organizations that had survived systemic crises could reveal successful design characteristics, especially for organizations that operate in recurrent conflict situations.

3.3 Need for donor guidelines to assess whether MFIs have capacity and ability to work in conflict areas.

There now exist guidelines specifically developed for conflict situations to facilitate needs assessments and program designs based on best practices. But detailed guidance for identification and evaluation of appropriate partners to implement microfinance programs in conflict situations is lacking. While donor guidelines were developed in 1995 by a consortium of donors for the selection of implementing partners, they are not particularly useful for conflict

situations.¹ Clear guidelines are needed to help donors locate good institutions capable of implementing microfinance . These donor guidelines would need to consider a range of contexts to be widely applicable.

3.4 Informal microfinance in conflict areas less documented

Little is known on the informal arrangements conducted during and in post-conflict situations. These informal practices may offer valuable insights for developing formal mechanisms to suit local conditions. For example, information on informal arrangements, such as pawning, money-lending, remittances and safe keeping services, provided in refugee camps and in areas where returnees and refugees are settling down is rare. A study on the hawala system - an informal money transfer and lending system - in Afghanistan provides important lessons for developing efficient microfinance operations through strategic alliances. Also, the role of ROSCAs and traders, and linkages that form are seldom examined carefully.

3.5 Need for information on microfinance other than credit in conflict settings

General guidelines exist on when to offer microfinance in post conflict areas. However, the literature has provided little practical advice for development and supply of other microfinance products, such as savings, money transfers and insurance products.

3.6 Need to understand how to integrate youth in microfinance amid conflict

While the role of youth in conflict reduction and reconstruction is acknowledged, there is no explicit documentation on experiences with provision of microfinance to youth. Existing program experiences with youth pertain to non-financial services to help youth develop livelihood skills. It is generally presumed that youth, especially between 14 to 20 years of age, are not ideal clients for microfinance, due to the belief that they are high risk borrowers with relatively little business experience and skills. This presumption, however, has not been tested through research, as a large research gap remains in the area of youth and microfinance.

Ample opportunities, nonetheless, exist for furthering the development of microfinance in conflict-affected environments.

¹ Small and Micro Enterprise Finance Guiding principles for Selecting and Supporting Intermediaries, Committee of Donor Agencies for Small Enterprise Development, 1995. www.cgap.org

Microfinance Amid Conflict: Searchable Resource List

4.1 [Background on Conflict-Affected Situations](#)

- Client coping mechanisms
- Conflict conditions
- Demand for microfinance in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood
- Relief

4.2 [Microfinance Adaptations in Conflict Situations](#)

- Apex organizations
- Challenges
- Client coping mechanisms
- Conditions
- Demand for microfinance
- Exit strategy
- Grants
- Group loans
- Informal finance
- Islamic banking
- Lessons learned
- Livelihood intervention strategy
- Money transfers
- Products
- Project design
- Security

4.3 [Lessons Learned and Donor Guidelines](#)

- Design
- Donor guidelines
- Implementation
- Lessons learned

4.4 [Monitoring and Evaluation](#)

- Performance standards
- Monitoring and evaluation

4.5 [Microfinance for minority groups](#)

- Refugees and IDPs
- Demobilized soldiers
- Women

4.6 **Regions**

- [Africa](#)
- [Africa, East](#)
- [Africa, West](#)
- [Africa, Southern](#)
- [Asia](#)
- [Asia, Central](#)
- [Asia, Southeast](#)
- [Caribbean](#)
- [Europe, Southeast](#)
- [Latin America](#)
- [Middle East](#)

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